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ABSTRACT

A classroom technique called "ubertragung," used for exercise and evaluation of oral communication, is explained as it is applied in a course in business German for native speakers of Norwegian. Learners read a text in Norwegian containing information relevant to the study of German for international trade. Later, students use the information in simulation of a professional situation in German. Generally, students speak in a dialogue but may also record a message or make a short presentation to an audience. Learners are encouraged to address a partner, to stimulate feedback. Pragmatic structure of communication in a professional situation is emphasized. A sample exercise, including the background article in Norwegian, is supplied. In construction of the instructional model, research on discourse processing was consulted. The objective is free speech production with specific content in project-oriented exercises. Students are made aware of the rules of interactive discourse with adaptation for cultural barriers and professional behavior. Direct translation, commonly taught in Scandinavia, is avoided. "Ubertragung" is used from the beginning of the course, with the various steps in the discourse process isolated and discussed through text analysis. The method is seen as useful for teaching languages for specific purposes. (MSE)

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Discourse in Professional Situations

by Ingrid Neumann

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1. The Teaching Concept "Übertragung"

1.1. Introduction

"Übertragung" is an efficient tool for exercise and evaluation of oral communication. It combines pragmatic and didactic purposes. At first sight "Übertragung" may look like oral translation, but it has a different aim, a different social function and the result is a different text.

1.2. What is "Übertragung"

When doing "Übertragung" learners first read a TEXT in the L1-Norwegian (cf. 1.4). The text contains information relevant to their study of LSP and international trade.

Later the learners are asked to use relevant information from the text in a simulated SITUATION, speaking the L2 - German. The situation should be similar to one they can expect to come across in their professional lives. We call it therefore a PROFESSIONAL SITUATION.

Exercises are done in small groups or individually spoken on tape. The tape is a document for later analyses. In examinations "Übertragung" is spoken on tape in the language laboratory.

¹ The German title will be used in this paper.

1.3. The Professional Situation

The professional situation has been generally specified to the students as being the background for something they say to a foreign business colleague. From their training in international business they have a knowledge of the general conditions arising from their capacity as representative of a company. Guided by that knowledge and the current situation they reproduce content from the text strategically, selecting among ideas and data and organising them according to the need of the moment.

In most cases the students speak dialogue, although they could also be asked to speak a message on tape or to simulate a short talk to an audience. The dialogue may sometimes cause difficulties when speaking on tape, as there is no other person to react. The learners are encouraged to address a partner, pausing for the partner to put in feedback, or themselves to simulate reaction to feedback such as:

*ja, Sie verstehen doch, was ich meine - * aufzuräumen - ja*

We presuppose that communication in a professional situation is different from private communication. In a professional situation information is used strategically, in speech-act-manner, in the pursuit of a PROFESSIONAL AIM. This aspect of the "pragmatic structure" must be given high priority in all LSP-teaching. For "Übertragung" it is essential. The overall professional aim in all business communication* is generally to make a profit for

* (-) = pause.

¹ Cf. van Dijk and Kintsch (1977:67) for the term.

² Wäge (1985:79) has a good introduction to this.

the company, although any single dialogue in a professional situation would only be an instance of this, e.g. telling a potential buyer what one has just read about a market of common interest or trying to build up a good personal relationship with a business colleague.

1.4. An Example

This is a recent examination paper. Samples from transcripts of student tapes illustrate this article:

Instructions:

Reading, preparing talk, note-taking 20 minutes

Talking on tape, editing your tape 20 minutes

Your talk should be no longer than 5 minutes altogether.

The Situation:

You are placed as a trainee with the company DEMINEX in Essen. In your department you have a colleague, Mrs Giedecke. She has worked in Stavanger and knows the Norwegian oil business well. One morning Mrs Giedecke takes up the present state of the Norwegian economy with you. Now that oil prices are rising, there should be an upward trend in the Norwegian economy, she says. You have just received a bunch of Norwegian newspapers from your mother and have the attached article fresh in your memory. You comment on Mrs Giedecke's suggestions. If you like, you can allow pauses for questions and feedback from your partner.

Lang vei å gå

Arbeidsdirektør Bjørtnar Gjerde kunne i går legge fram tall som kaster et streif av lys over regjeringens bord. Der har den dystre situasjonen på arbeidsmarkedet stått øverst på omtrent alle dagsordenen den siste tida.

En nedgang i ledigheten på 6700 i mars, slik at tallet på arbeidsløse igjen kryper under 80 000, betyr sannsynligvis at det verste nå er over. Men det er samtidig en viss økning av folk som går på såkalte tiltak, og slår vi de to tallene sammen, kommer vi opp i 127 000. Selv om vi kan trekke 12-15 000 fra dette tallet — det er de som permanent er på attføring eller spesielle tiltak på grunn av handicap —, blir det likevel over 110 000 igjen som nå ikke har ordinært arbeid, men som ønsker det. Det er selvsagt et altfor høyt tall.

SIDE 2

ARNE FINBORUD



Selv om det meste nå går bedre i norsk økonomi, er vi knapt kommet i gang med den omstillingen i næringslivet alle ønsker. De høye oljeprisene kan bli en livsfarlig sovepute.

Da forrige oversikt over arbeidsløse ble kjent, førte det til en politisk runde i Stortinget. Det vil neppe skje nå, for om et par uker skal man likevel diskutere den store tiltakspakken regjeringen la fram før påske. Men den såkalte februar-runden endte som et nytt borgerlig havari og demonstrasjon av at det for tida ikke finnes noe samende alternativ til regjeringen. Runden kunne umulig gi mersmak for opposisjonen.

Dette viser også hvorfor Arbeiderpartiet har klart seg så godt gjennom debatten om den rekordstore arbeidsløsheten. Ingen ting tyder på at regjeringen vil møte en mer samlet og målbevisst opposisjon i resten av stortingsperioden heller. Senterpartiet har allerede varslet at det støtter regjeringens tiltakspakke i store trekk. Høyre har sitt eget opplegg, og KrF vet neppe hvilken fot det skal stå på etter den rystelsen partiet har vært gjennom den siste tida. Jeg tipper at Harald Synnes fortsatt sørger for at partiet slår følge med Senterpartiet i de viktigste spørsmålene som har med økonomi å gjøre.

Mange vil trolig ta forrige måneds nedgang i arbeidsløsheten som det endelige bevis på at nå er hovedjobben gjort i den økonomiske oppryddingen, og at vi kan åpne noen kraner igjen. Her setter jo Oslo Børs ny re-



kord og oljeprisen klatrer over 20 dollar igjen. Prisene er under kontroll, renten går ned, en ny lønnslov er i havn og utenriksregnskapet vil allerede i år vise overskudd. Attpå til har vi valgår, og under slike forhold vil det være fristende å dele ut noen godbiter.

En slik tankegang vil være livsfarlig hvis den får gjennomslag i den kommende valgkampen. Det er nok å vise til at vi også i 1988 tapte konkurransevne overfor utlandet, og det i et år med minimale lønnstillegg. Skal vi klare å gjennomføre den omstillingen de fleste ønsker, med hovedvekt på landbasert, konkurranseutsatt næringsliv,

har vi ingen grunn til å slappe av ennå.

I dette bildet er økningen i oljeprisen et tveegget sverd. Når Arne Øien nå sier at han håper prisene fortsetter å øke, bør han også tenke på hva dette vil bety for de internasjonale konjunkturer og dermed etterspørsel etter de varer Norge ønsker å selge mer av. De lave oljeprisene var en av hovedfaktorene bak den konjunkturoppgangen som har gitt vår tradisjonelle eksportindustri så god drahjelp de siste par åra, og som faktisk har reddet oss fra en langt verre situasjon enn vi har vært inne i. Slik sett har vi jo vært heldige midt oppi tilbakeslaget.

Men Norge har god tradisjon i dobbeltmoral når det gjelder oljepriser. Vi ønsker høye priser for vårt eget vedkommende, men lukker øynene for konsekvensene det får på verdensøkonomien. Dessuten utløser høye oljepriser en ny runde inflasjon verden over, det vil vi også merke på alle våre importvarer.

Og vi er som kjent ikke uten erfaringer med å skape inflasjon selv heller. Den kolossale satsingen for å få ned arbeidsløsheten før valget, kan true den positive prisutviklingen her hjemme, selv om virkningen neppe vil melde seg på denne siden av valgdagen.

2. The Linguistic Concept

2.1. Linguistic, didactic and pragmatic considerations

When first developing "Übertragung" we turned to current linguistic theory. We found that a functional, speech-act orientated and psycholinguistic approach would be adequate and were particularly inspired by the writings of van Dijk and Kintsch about discourse processing, i.e. the comprehension, storage, retrieval and production of discourse.

Didactic aims were FREE SPEECH PRODUCTION, but with a given CONTENT. Students should be made aware of the rules of INTERACTIVE DISCOURSE, taking into account CULTURAL BARRIERS and the PROFESSIONAL aspect⁵. The overall principle was PROJECT ORIENTATED work.

We drew up a MODEL for discourse processing (fig.1.), which opens up for these aims and allows for didactic effort to be directed at essential points in the process. You read a text (A) and store it in your memory (B). Later a professional situation (C) makes you reactivate content you have stored and rearrange it in your mind (D), before producing speech, "Übertragung". Most of that process is outside of our control. Reflections arise as to how one could improve the process by didactic measures.

According to Schema Theory⁶ so called schemata for various types of knowledge are stored in our minds with individual variation. Not only content from the text is stored in our memories, but understandably all other previous knowledge and skills. Relevant for "Übertragung" are e.g. pragmatic knowledge, and knowledge and

⁵ According to our interpretation of employers' needs, cf. Tyekkunnakaper (1984).

⁶ Cf. van Dijk/Kintsch 1977.

DISCOURSE PROCESSING IN "ÜBERTRAGUNG"

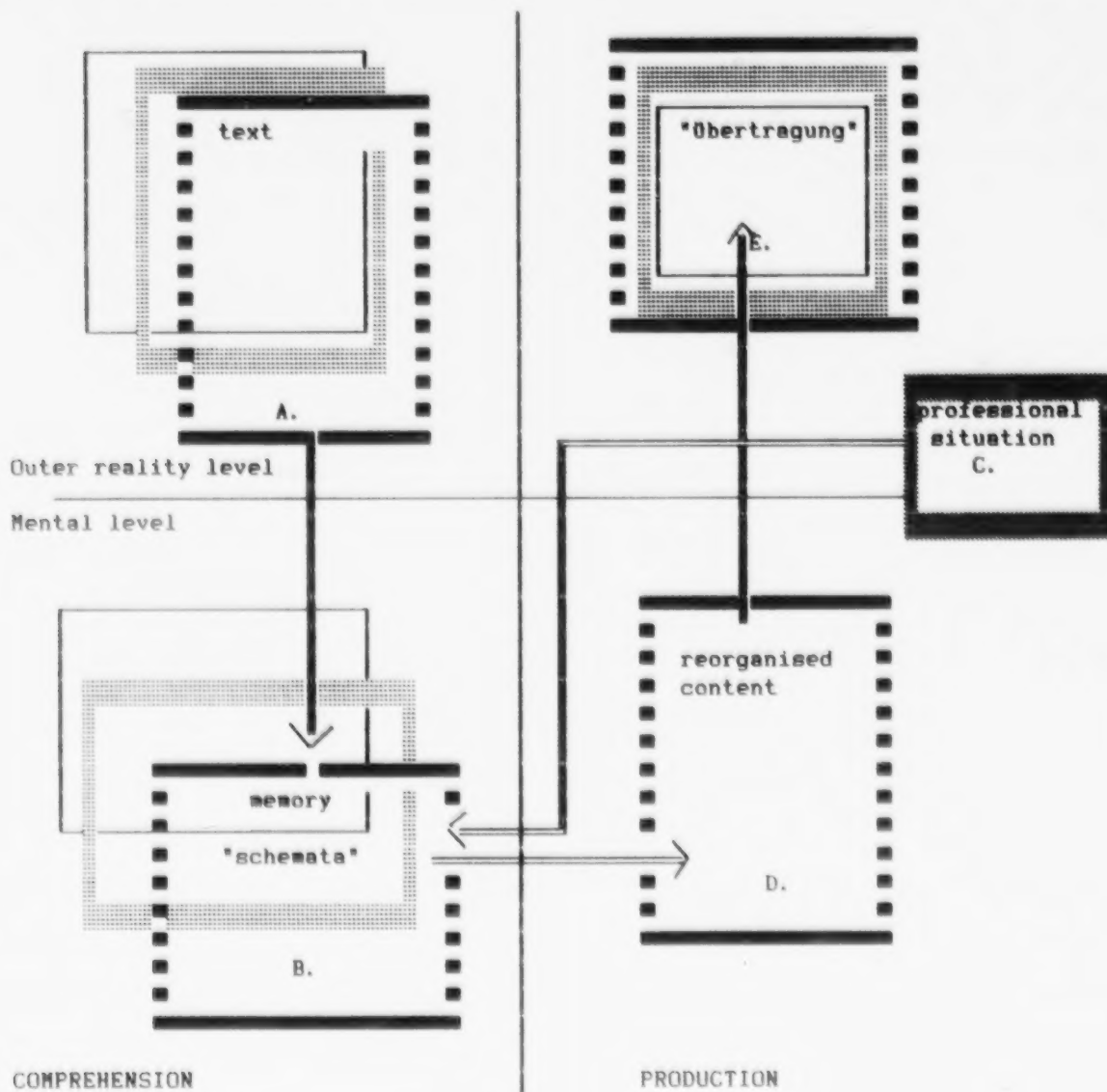


Figure 1.

skills in L1 and L2. This we have tried to illustrate by different frames (A and B in figure 1.).

The professional situation comes into the picture from outside, as a stimulus to reactivate stored knowledge. This is reorganised and coded with the minima of speech: words, structure and sound. To illustrate this reorganisation let us take an example from the

examination above. The text is about unemployment and prospects for the Norwegian government. Here the oil price is a subordinate topic, whereas it is the main topic in the dialogue between the trainee and Mrs Giedecke. In that talk the fate of the government might be of marginal interest. The cohesive relations and ties⁷ also change. Causal cohesion in one context:

- The government has good prospects in the elections,
because the oil price has gone up.

becomes additive cohesion in another pragmatic context:

- The oil price has gone up, but there is still unemployment. By the way this does not seem to effect the position of the government.

This shows how the pragmatic dimension effects the content and how students can be made aware of the decisions they have to make before producing discourse.

2.2. "Übertragung" is not Translation

We very definitely kept translation at a distance, when developing our model, warning students against word-to-word translation and building in practical devices to help them avoid translating such as: handing in the L1-text after reading it and giving them hints on note-taking techniques in order to practise reading for content rather than for words to translate. Our aim was independent free speech, and translation is not. In Scandinavia translation in the teaching of foreign languages had become a mechanical exercise for most learners, reproducing an

⁷ Cf. Halliday/Hassan (1976).

L1-text into the L2 word-by-word and structure-by-structure*.

3. Student Performance

Students can start doing "Übertragung" from the beginning of their course. In the classroom the various steps in the discourse process are isolated and discussed by the analysis of texts and tapes or transcripts of tapes. We have chosen examples from students' performance to illustrate some of these steps.

READING for the comprehension of content is one such step, analysing the structure of ideas and data and listing vocabulary for later use. Ways to REORGANISE a text is another step. The trainee in the above examination paper is free to select content, as we have seen above (2.1.), or to generalise, summarise or draw conclusions: *und, eh, das bedeutet wahrscheinlich, daß jetzt, wird die Situation sich verbessern*

Certainly, she can also corrupt ideas in order to fulfil her professional aim or use data in a way to create a false impression. This is not the didactic aim, but the examiner has to judge whether wrong interpretation of the original text is due to poor comprehension or to clever strategic use in the new context. Kintech and van Dijk (1978) have interesting data on individual variations of recalling discourse, useful knowledge when teaching and evaluating "Übertragung".

Knowledge of the regulations of INTERACTIONAL¹ discourse are important. The speaker in "Übertragung" switches all the time

* I agree that this has changed with the modern way of looking at translation, taking into account the functional aspects of speech, paying attention to the user and the situative context.

¹ Addressing the partner, cf. Brown/Yule (1983:1).

between addressing her partner directly:

Ich weiß ja, ... Frau Giedecke and TRANSACTIONAL¹⁰ talk:

Aber jetzt sind also die Erdölpreise gestiegen

This switching in itself can be used strategically in pursuit of the professional aim thereby gaining the initiative.

One strategy could be to use the right phrases for greeting and politeness: *Ja, guten Tag, Frau Giedecke¹¹, wie geht's Ihnen?*

Ich muß mich jetzt verabschieden. Tschüß, Frau Giedecke.

The greeting *Tschüß* is spreading up the social scale in Germany, but it is debatable whether the trainee has taken the right decision in using this formula to somebody of a higher professional status.¹²

In speech production REFERENCE TO THE TOPIC is an indicator of the general interest in current affairs it is considered desirable to possess in business management: *Sie haben Interesse an der Situation in der norwegischen Wirtschaft ...*

So is the SOURCE OF INFORMATION: ... *in der Zeitung "Dagbladet" hab ich einen ganz interessanten Artikel gelesen.*

The last sample indicates a consideration of CULTURAL and LANGUAGE BARRIERS, so does:

"Arbeiderpartiet", das heißt die Regierungspartei ...

Cultural and political institutions that have no equivalent institution in the other country, like *Arbeiderpartiet* or *Dagbladet*, call for clarification. Let us finally show some of

¹⁰ Talking about the topic. (Brown/Yule:ibid)

¹¹ Repeating names in conversation is not as common in Norwegian and therefore has to be learnt.

¹² The style in the rest of the speaker's transcript would give an indication of the chosen social relationship between the two. The instructions in the examination paper are not conclusive on that point.

the clarification strategies at hand in oral communication¹³.

- Die Außenwirtschaftsrechnung - kann man das sagen?

- ja, Sie verstehen doch, was ich meine - aufzuräumen - ja

In these examples the speaker refers to her own limitations, using META-COMMUNICATION and waiting for feedback, in order to give the partner a chance to understand.

Summing up I would again like to underline the flexibility and dynamic character of "Übertragung". It is an exercise-centred concept, but can be approached via many facets of linguistic theory. This makes it a useful LSP-teaching device.

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